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The horror remains - 20 years later, memories of Dean Corll haunt survivor

By EVAN MOORE AUGUST 8, 1993 Publication: Houston Chronicle Page: 1 Word Count: 2394

TWENTY YEARS ago today the anguished voice of 16-year-old Elmer Wayne Henley rang out over a television newsman's carphone.

"Mama? Mama, I killed Dean!"

A few yards from Henley, across the crushed-gravel drive of Southwest Boat Storage, evidence of the first large-scale serial murder case in Texas was being unearthed from a corrugated metal stall. Inside that dim oven a pair of jail trusties sweated and gagged as they dug. A carrion odor swelled from the shed as the shovels unearthed first one, then another corpse, wrapped in plastic and packed in lime.

Boat stall No. 11 would yield 17 bodies of teen-age boys. More would be found near Sam Rayburn Reservoir and still more on High Island until the total reached 27. Henley would receive six concurrent 99-year sentences. His accomplice, David Owen Brooks, 18, would receive one 99-year sentence. Their mentor, 33-year-old Houston Lighting & Power technician Dean Corll and his plywood "torture-board," would become infamous. The longest string of sexual torture killings in the country at that time wou ld be attributed to him.

As the story unfolded, listeners were aghast. For two years Corll had used Henley and Brooks to procure other teen-age boys, who were grotesquely tortured, sexually mutilated, then murdered. The killing had continued as Corll moved from one Houston apartment to another and, finally, to a house in Pasadena. There, Henley had turned on Corll and shot him as Corll was planning to murder one of Henley's friends and Henley's girlfriend.

So, as the trusties labored in the reeking shed, Dean Corll lay dead, stretched on a pathologist's gurney with six .22-caliber bullet wounds inflicted by Henley. Autopsy results would be Corll's only contribution to the case -- "a 33-year-old white man, measuring 71 inches in length and weighing 190 pounds. Alcohol, negative. Barbiturates, negative. Narcotics, negative . . . Death as a result of gunshot wounds of left chest (1) and back (3). Homicide."

Corll would never be questioned or tried. Whatever he might have said about the killings, or any others, was buried with him.

There are differing opinions about whether all of Corll's victims were found. Henley and Brooks, who both declined interviews for this article, told of 27, all killed between 1972 and 1973. Former Pasadena Police Detective Dave Mullican, who was assigned the case, believes all were accounted for. Lt. Ed Goad, who was Mullican's supervisor, thinks there are more and that Henley and Brooks know of them. Former Harris County District Attorney Carol Vance, who prosecuted Henley and Brooks, says he simply doesn't know and doubts that anyone ever will.

And Sue McLemore believes that, not only are there more bodies, but there may have been other accomplices, accomplices she knew.

McLemore has reason to suspect. One of those killed was her brother, Willard K. "Rusty" Branch. Moreover, for the better part of two years she and her brother were regulars at Corll's apartments.

They knew Corll, Henley and Brooks well. Before the trio strapped Branch to Corll's plywood and strangled him in February 1972, the Branch siblings spent two or three days each week mingling with the numerous other youths who gravitated to the movable feast of cheap drugs at Corll's. Marijuana and spray paint were the staples, with airplane glue and assorted pills added. Often as many as 14 or more youths lounged in Corll's living room, passing the stubs of marijuana cigarettes, sniffing glue and `baggin'" paint.

Usually, 16-year-old Rusty Branch brought his little sister with him. She was small, even for 11. Thin, with wide-set, trusting eyes. Always unobtrusive, she rarely spoke. Usually unnoticed, she was allowed to remain. She often sat under the kitchen table, breathing in acrylic bliss from paint-soaked towels in a paper bag while the party progressed around her.

"All these kids knew each other, or knew Henley or Brooks," she said. "My brother had met Henley at the SPJST swimming pool like a lot of the other kids and, when Rusty was supposed to be taking care of me, he'd take me over to Dean's."

The SPJST pool, operated by a Slovakian fraternal order, was a magnet for Heights teen-agers in warm weather and it was a favorite hunting ground for Henley and Brooks.

Sue McLemore didn't know Henley and Brooks were procurers, that they were dispatched by Corll to lure other boys. She didn't know Corll kept the "torture board" in his bedroom, or that many of the boys who dropped out of sight were being murdered there. She only knew the parties at Corll's apartment offered companionship and spray paint in a grocery bag.

McLemore, 34, has lung damage today to remind her of the bags. She also has hazy memories of the bizarre world in Corll's apartment, memories of events that would have triggered alarm if not viewed by a child through a prism of drugs. Some of those memories were buried in self-defense. From day to day, if she didn't recall them, she didn't have to think about them and, if she didn't think about them, they weren't real.

Years of psychiatric counseling and hypnosis have brought some of them back.

"I remember, once, sitting under the kitchen table and there were four boys sitting under the other end, nude, smoking marijuana," she said.

"Dean came walking in naked and I said, `Dean, I'm hungry.' He put some mayonnaise on a piece of bread and handed it to me and I started eating it and one of the boys started laughing at something.

"He just kept laughing and laughing. And then he was choking and he started turning blue and he was on the floor. I said, `Dean, there's something wrong with him,' and Dean picked him up over his shoulder and started walking out of the room toward his bedroom with him. The boy was throwing up then and his bladder emptied. He was overdosing, but I don't know what Dean did with him back there. I remember I thought, `He's dying,' but it didn't seem so strange at the time.

"Back then it didn't seem so strange for somebody to turn blue.

"There's another one. It's not all clear, but I remembered Corll buying me a dress at Weiner's on 34th. I can remember Corll's hands being so large when he helped me put it on. I was sitting on the console in the front of his van when we drove over and he had a cloth just behind the seat that covered the back. He never let me in the back. And there was a smell coming from behind that cloth.

"I didn't know what that smell was then, but I know now. He had a body back there."

She also remembers four older men who were often in Corll's bedroom, a room the younger teen-agers were told not to enter. Two of those men are now dead, one from a drug overdose and another by murder. A third, a 39-year-old Texas prison inmate, convicted of sexual assault of a child, refused to be interviewed. McLemore does not know who the fourth man was or where he is now.

"I looked at mug shots down at HPD and identified (the three)," said McLemore. "I don't know what those guys knew about or what they didn't, but I know they were in the bedroom with Dean a lot and he never let me back there."

After Corll's death, Pasadena police searched his bedroom and found his 8-by-3-foot plywood board with eyebolts at the corners to fasten restraints, eight pairs of handcuffs, a large knife, a gas mask and a box containing a 14-inch dildo and a tube of petroleum jelly. In one apartment, he was said to have bullet-proofed his bedroom door with a sheet of steel.

"It would have been hard to be back there without knowing something was going on," said McLemore.

McLemore and her brother continued to be regulars at Corll's for the better part of two years until sometime in February 1972, when Rusty simply wasn't at home anymore.

"My father said he ran away, that he'd gone to California," said McLemore. "He'd left before, so I wasn't surprised. But then I didn't hear from him and I knew something was wrong."

The persistent feeling of uneasiness about her brother continued after McLemore was sent to live with her mother in Arkansas some months later. She was in Arkansas on Aug. 8, 1973, and she and her mother were watching television when the picture of the boat shed appeared. McLemore watched the scoop of a backhoe, saw Rusty's name on a list of missing boys from the Heights and realized he undoubtedly was among the 17 bodies unearthed.

It was 12 years later when she finally identified her brother's body. She first contacted the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office in 1982 and began efforts to identify her brother's remains. In 1985 she finally identified hair samples and described several small fractures that matched those of "body number 12" from the boat shed.

That left four unidentified bodies from the Corll case -- and the nagging question of whether there could be others buried elsewhere.

"I was never satisfied that we found all of Corll's victims," said Carol Vance. Vance, now in private law practice and chairman of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice, said he believes police learned all they could from Henley and Brooks, but he does not discount the possibility that Corll killed before his association with the two, or that he may have had other accomplices.

"I'm afraid it's something we'll never know," he said.

Mullican, the former Pasadena detective, now a Harris County deputy constable, said he believes the toll stopped at 27. He said he established a rapport with Henley during his questioning of the youth.

"I actually think, if it hadn't been for Corll's influence at a vulnerable point, Henley might have been a normal kid," said Mullican. "He might have been a thief or something. I don't know. But I don't think he'd have gotten into this sort of thing.

"At the time we were questioning him, I think he was being straightforward with us and told us about everything he knew.

"Corll, I think, was progressive. I think he started killing with Brooks and Henley and then he got worse and worse."

Goad, Mullican's former supervisor, disagrees. Henley, he says, had once indicated there were other bodies, but later changed his story.

"I think he could probably show you where more are if he wanted to, but there's no incentive for him now," said Goad. Henley, who was last denied parole in January 1992, becomes eligible again in October 1994. Brooks has a parole application pending, and McLemore and others are protesting it.

One of those who oppose that parole is Walter Scott. Scott, father of Mark Scott, has waited years in hopes of identifying his son's body. Brooks told investigators that Mark Scott, 18, was killed by Corll in early 1972 and buried in the boat shed. There were no dental records for the youth, however. His remains were once thought to be those McLemore identified as her brother's in 1985, but now are believed to be among the remaining four corpses.

"I've put aside money to bury my boy, if we can ever identify him," said Scott.

And at least one other person who opposes parole for Brooks or Henley is Mary West, Dean Corll's mother. West, who operates a small candy company in Colorado, maintains her son was innocent, a victim of Brooks and Henley.

"My son was never tried for anything," she said. "Since the bodies were buried in his boat stall, I suppose he had to have had something to do with burying them, but I don't think he killed all those boys.

"And I think Henley should have been tried for killing my son."

And McLemore, who has paid a price for identifying her brother, is continuing psychoanalysis and hypnosis in an effort to plumb her memory.

"When these things come back, I blank out," she said. "I simply retreat into myself.

"After I identified Rusty and the news media did some stories about it, a woman almost attacked me in a grocery store. She spit on me and told me, `If your brother hadn't been a queer, he wouldn't have been killed.'

"I made it home all right, but then I simply blacked out for hours.

"Now, I'm still trying to remember everything I can about the things that happened at Corll's. To deal with trauma you have to remember it and deal with the memory.

"But I don't know that they're things I want to remember."

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The Houston horror story

Dean Arnold Corll, 33, a technician for Houston Lighting & Power Co., tortured, sexually abused and killed at least 27 boys and young men in the early 1970s, then buried their bodies at three known locations in the Houston area. Two Heights teen-agers procured his victims.

Elmer Wayne Henley, 16, fatally shot Dean Arnold Corll early on the morning of Aug. 8, 1973, after hours of drinking and glue sniffing at Corll's house in Pasadena. That night, Henley led police to a boatshed full of bodies in south Houston, and the story of one of the nation's worst serial killers began to unfold. Henley admitted participating in the slayings, was convicted of six and sentenced to concurrent 99-year prison terms. He became eligible for parole in 1983, but has been denied releas e repeatedly, most recently after a much-publicized bid in 1991. He is confined in the state prison system's Coffield Unit near Palestine.

David Owen Brooks, 18, admitted helping Henley procure victims for Corll. He received a single 99-year sentence in one slaying. He was denied parole in 1991 and remains in the Ramsey I Unit in Rosharon.

Henley and Brooks led authorities to 17 bodies in a boat shed on Silver Bell in Houston, four on the shores of Sam Rayburn Reservoir and six on the beach at High Island.

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